



The 23rd International AIDS Candlelight Memorial

The Women's Club of Aruba conducts an evening devoted to AIDS awareness in Wilhelmina Park

Aruba is one of many countries that participated in the 23rd International AIDS Candlelight Memorial on Sunday evening, May 21. All over the communities gathered to be reminded of the consequences of this dreaded disease and to confront how it is affecting their country and this year in particular, the youth. The original International AIDS Candlelight Memorial was held in 1983, when the cause of AIDS was unknown and no more than a few thousand AIDS deaths had been recorded. The organizers wished to honor the memory of those lost to AIDS and to demonstrate support for those living with AIDS. That still remains the focus of the event. This year the theme is "Lighting a path to a brighter future," which places the thrust of this year's AIDS awareness campaign at saving the next generation, teaching them to be aware of the problem and conscientious about prevention.

Addressing the gathering in Wilhelmina Park and welcoming His Excellency, the Governor of Aruba, Fredis Refunjol and his wife, was Women's Club President Bernadette Shouten. In both Papiamentu and English, she quoted some startling and alarming statistics as to the continued growth of this scourge, particularly in the Caribbean, which is second only to Africa in the number of reported cases of AIDS. Though Aruba's case number is minute, education and awareness, particularly for the island's youth, is essential to prevent the growth of this pandemic. Ms. Shouten introduced the AIDS theme poster, which is a memorial to the children that have lost their lives to AIDS.

Mr. Edwin Abath, Program Officer of the National AIDS Committee and a member of the UNAIDS theme group also spoke of the social consequences of AIDS, how it destroys the family, making outcasts of its victims, and how prevention is imperative, as "each new case of AIDS, means there will be additional cases."

Mrs. Stella Merryweather of the Women's Club AIDS Committee lit the four symbolic candles that signaled the distribution of candles to the entire gathering. A number of faith based organizations came forward to light their candles, and the Youth Group of the Red Cross. Vanessa Tromp, Mistress of Ceremonies for the evening then gave her personal testimony of many of the brave people that she had encountered in her work. She recounted how despite being afflicted with the disease, and suffering terribly, these victims still strived to educate the public and bring awareness regarding the prevention of the spread of AIDS, and sympathy as opposed to scorn for those that are living with or dying from it. The evening finished with a word and Benediction from Father Jacob of the Anglican Church in San Nicolas.

Since 1983, the AIDS pandemic has claimed more than 28 million lives, with about 42 million now living with HIV and AIDS. As AIDS continues to ravage communities around the world, the Candlelight Memorial Service has become a way for communities to take action by publicly mourning loved ones lost to AIDS, and by strengthening local and national commitments to fighting the pandemic. 110 countries take part, with Candlelight Memorial Services being conducted in tiny hamlets to bustling cities by the thousands joined in this effort to increase awareness, the greatest weapon in fighting this dread disease. Aruba and the Women's Club are very proud to be a part of that worldwide effort.